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# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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## Editorial

### Releasing birds as an act of piety

Abdur Ahmed of Traffic India, in a letter refers to Rajat Bhargava's article in the March/April issue of our NL and provides some further facts to show how counter-productive this act of piety is. "It is estimated that 30-40 per cent of all birds trapped for business in the country are traded for release purposes. The remaining are sold as pets and for table purposes. In international commercial trade about 3.5 to 5 million wild birds are documented each year. Since as many as 3/4ths will die before they reach the ultimate consumer it is estimated that 14- 20 million birds are trapped annually ... In Lucknow both the common crow and the jungle crow are released on Thursdays and Fridays, a practice started by the old Nawab of Lucknow ... The demand for neelkanth (Indian roller) is so high, the demand is met by substituting it with white-breasted kingfisher (which is trapped very easily) and which laymen mistake for the neelkanth".

How shall we educate our holy men to stop this cruelty?

### Pune and Ahmednagar

On 16th March, my wife and I departed for Pune and the same evening Prakash Gole arranged an unexpected but very pleasant meeting of the birdwatchers. This active group will ensure that birds get a fair deal in the development plans of the future. The Mula-Mutha Sanctuary is one example of their efforts to preserve natural areas.

It was a great pleasure to meet Thomas Gay, a former member of the ICS, who until a decade ago wrote frequently for our Newsletter. Now in his 90s' he has managed to keep a detailed diary for a whole year 1.12.1995 to 31.12.1996 of the birds which come to feed on titbits placed every morning on his terrace. "Terrace Breakfast". Surprisingly the blue rock thrush (*Monticola solitarius*) was one of the group of birds which came for breakfast. I would have thought that *solitarius* would hesitate to join the others.

On 17th March we went to Shirampur near Ahmednagar. I had stayed in this area as a school boy in 1932 (I think), and there were black bucks and great Indian bustards in plenty. While the bustards are extinct, it is cheering to find that small numbers of black buck have been seen again. But black buck are so destructive of agricultural crops that they will survive only if a sanctuary is created. If this is done, perhaps the bustards too will stage a comeback in an area where they were so plentiful 70 years ago.

There were a number of peafowl roaming around on the farm where we stayed, and because of the protection they receive from the local population they seem to be happy and secure. It just shows how important the local attitude is.

### Delhi Diary — 19th to 30th March 1997

The ten days in Delhi from 19th to 30th march, made me realise how much more birdlife there is in Delhi compared to Bangalore. No dearth of sparrows either. Every morning I walked along the grand Margs and Roads (Tilak, Shahjehan, Aurangzeb, Kemal Attaturk) to the Race Course — about 10 kms. There were vultures galore on the Peepal and other large trees. Some say that urban Delhi has more trees than the surrounding areas and so these birds roost and nest in the city and forage in the countryside. Look skywards in Delhi, what a wealth of kites, vultures and presumably others, right from early morning till late evening. The large green barbets of Delhi seem to have louder voices than their southern cousins. A magpie robin (in my daughter's garden in Tilak Lane) sat on a branch of the Peepal, just 10 ft from me in my chair and was attempting to sing. The voice was still in the making and it was more hissing than singing, but in another month the song will fill the garden.

Ravi Dayal told me that this year there were no redstarts in Delhi. Can other readers from Delhi confirm or refute this observation? Incidentally, Ravi gave me the good news that "India Through Her Birds" is likely to hit the stands in the next six months. So one must never give up hope — not even with publishers.

Abdul Jamil Urfi, now with CEE in Ahmedabad, was fortunately in Delhi for a long week-end and he took me to the zoo. What a delightful stretch of nature in an urban area. We saw pelicans, painted storks, cormorants, and the usual spectrum of ducks, an Indian moorhen and a whitebreasted water hen. The weird calls of the Hoolock Gibbon heard perhaps over a quarter mile distressed me. Should this animal (solitary in its cage) be imprisoned here, instead of romping in the jungles of Assam? But I am now getting sentimental and talking like Maneka Gandhi.

Near the India Gate in New Delhi a man fed birds every morning. Chapaties for crows, and grain for blue-rock pigeons. What surprised me was that there was a mass formation of crows (all house crows if I remember right) around the man who was flinging the food scraps on the ground, but not a single individual of any other species. Just crows, and similarly in the area where he threw grain there were only pigeons and pigeons. No sparrows, no mynas I wonder if crows and pigeons object to the presence of other avians when they are feeding.

On 31st March, we were in Bombay to receive the First Salim Ali International Award for Conservation. The citation refers in warm terms to the Newsletter for Birdwatchers. So all of you contributors to the NL should be sharing the award.

### Kihim Diary — 2.4.1997 to 25.5.1997

Last year in the May/June 1996 issue of the NLBW, I wrote about the birds of Kihim and I have nothing substantially new to report. I wrote last year that the ashy swallow shrikes (*Artamus fuscus*) seem to have vanished as a result of the chemical fumes of the Thuli Fertilizer Factory (RCF). I was not

able to see any this year too. A birdwatching friend, however, insists that he has seen a few near the northern end of Kihim. The goldenbacked woodpeckers (Flamebacks as per new nomenclature) were very active. Their piercing laughter suggests that they have no complaints against the world.

As was the case last year, there was competition for the nesting hole in the casuarina tree between mynas, magpie robins and the goldenbacked woodpeckers. Is there a shortage of nesting sites because of the cutting down of mature trees? I make this comment on the basis that all three species were often engaged in noisy arguments, including a little elbow pushing around this favoured niche.

At the northern end of Kihim, above the banks of the creek, there is a stretch of shrubbery including *Salvadora persica* (the saviour of Persia). Quite often rosy pastors are seen here and I was delighted to see a flock on a Bombax tree. In the middle of April some of the Banyan trees were in fruit and the common grey hornbills (*Tockus birostris*) with their casques were often seen. They glide beautifully over a long distance. A few flips with their stiff primaries take them a long way. One was nesting in a neighbour's garden.

The yellow-throated sparrow (*Petronia xanthocollis*) has become well known as a result of Salim Ali's autobiography, *The Fall of a Sparrow*. A pair was nesting on a dead Bombax tree in mid April. The first clutch was eaten up; I suspect by a jungle crow who was often around the nesting site. The birds nested again (saw the pair on site on 3.5.1997).

Paradise flycatchers, adults and young, male and female, have been seen in Kihim this season, so the family reports. I missed them. But I saw a whitespotted fantail flycatcher flitting among the branches high up on a mango tree on 3.5.1997. For many years, this was the favourite bird of our garden in Andheri, Bombay. Its elegant movements are matched by its dainty appearance. But over the years I have always seen this bird either dancing on the ground, or sallying after insects just a few feet off the ground, never at such a high altitude. I see from the Encyclopaedia of Indian Natural History (p.239) that there are 40 species of Flycatchers in the Indian sub-continent. Of these 8 are endemic. Which are they? I presume they are the black and orange, the redbreasted, Tickell's blue flycatcher, verditer flycatcher, Nilgiri flycatcher, brown flycatcher, greyheaded and whitebrowed fantail. If I am wrong please correct me.

The only new species I saw this time was a pair of common green pigeons on our banyan tree — what a confusion of names. In the Pictorial Guide, 3rd impression 1994, the name is yellowlegged green pigeon. In Salim Ali's 11th Edition 1979 p.54, the name is common green pigeon. Mercifully there is no change in the scientific name, *Treron phoenicoptera*. Interestingly, the nesting season of this species is March to June, while in the case of greyfronted green pigeon (*Treron pompadora*), an exclusive fruit eater, the season is from December-March. Can it be presumed therefore that the most profuse fruiting of trees is from December-March?

I was told that the calls of the white bellied sea eagle, *kank*, *kank*, *kank*, were often heard. My ears unfortunately do not

now "catch" this pitch of sound. But I saw the bird on three occasions and it is always a pleasure to see it specially when it is gliding with wings held above its body.

A red whiskered bulbul made a nest entirely from casuarina needles on a shrub alongside the wall of our house. Three eggs were being incubated day and night when we left on the 25th and on the 2nd June my daughter reported that 3 chicks were seen in the nest. Koels, coucals, coppersmiths, G.B. woodpeckers, whitebreasted kingfishers and redwhiskered bulbuls have all been very vocal. A couple of pittas, Jerdon's chloropsis, a white-throated ground thrush and little minivets were seen. Unfortunately I missed seeing the shama on Kankeshwar hill on my annual climb on 23 May.

Describing the calls of birds is difficult business, and I often look through the books to see how different authors describe the sounds they hear. Take the case of the common babbler. Stuart Baker, Vol. I, p. 199, says Jerdon described them as a 'low undertoned warbling whistle'. Surprisingly Hugh Whistler p. 45 describes the calls in the identical manner without the use of inverted commas. A clear case of plagiarism. Apparently Whistler was known to pick the brains of others without acknowledgement. Salim Ali too was one of his victims.

## International Ornithological Peace Park in Kutch

Readers will recall that in earlier issues I had mentioned that in several countries border disputes have been solved by the creation of Parks along their common boundaries. One place where this can be tried is the Rann of Kutch. Mr Salman Haider, our former Foreign Secretary, wrote to say that a common park under present circumstances was not possible but what could be attempted was for India and Pakistan to create their own national parks on both sides of the border and then have a common Advisory Committee to ensure that the entire stretch of country was managed on sound ecological lines. Mr JC Daniel of the BNHS has kindly agreed to act as Convenor of a group which may progress this idea. Will those of you who have been involved in the Kutch area or have attended the Seminar in Karachi some years ago, kindly take the trouble to send a note to Daniel about the manner in which this project could be developed and pursued.

## Newsletter — Selection of articles for current issue

During my absence from Bangalore between middle March and end May, a large number of articles have been received and I have given priority in this issue mainly to those relating to earlier ones.



# Birding and other Natural History Observations at Byet Dwarka, Saurashtra (Gujarat)

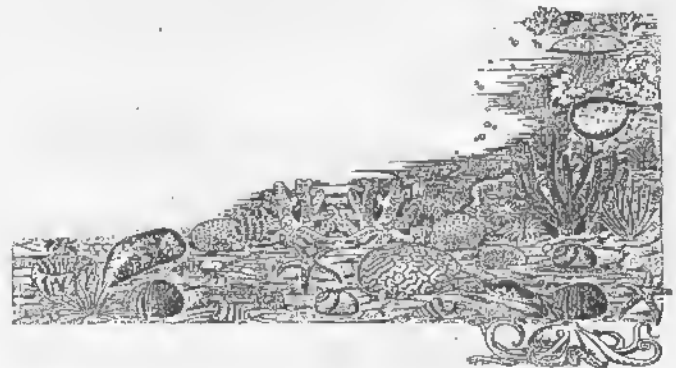
ABDUL JAMIL URFI, LALSINH RAOL, E.K. NARESHWAR and RAJINDERSINH JADEJA  
Sundervan Nature Discovery Centre, S.M. Road, Ahmedabad 380 015

**S**undervan Nature Discovery Centre in Ahmedabad has a permanent camp site at Byet Dwarka, a small island off the tip of the Saurashtra peninsula. Nature camps, focussing on marine theme are conducted here from November to March by our organization. During 1996 we made several visits to Byet Dwarka for the marine camps and our observations on the birdlife of this island are reported here. The word 'byet' means island in Gujarati.

If not for the birds then this part of Gujarat would be worth a visit for another reason too. This area is 'Lord Krishna's fabled land' and archaeologists and oceanographers are at work pulling up remnants from the mouth of the Gulf of Kutch and searching for evidence for the existence of old Dwarka city. On the mainland, Dwarka has a famous temple which is a popular pilgrimage site. At Byet Dwarka also there is a temple (*Raani Vaas*) which is frequented by pilgrims.

## Habitat

Byet Dwarka is a somewhat horse shoe shaped island approximately 24 km in periphery. Much of it is barren with *Prosopis juliflora*, *Acacia* sp. and *Euphoria* in the drier parts and a few broad-leaved trees (neem, *Ficus*, etc.) here and there. Its drier portions are reckoned as typical "Saw Scaled Viper" country but as far as the bird life is concerned the really



interesting areas are the sandy and rocky beaches and the coral reefs which are exposed at low tide. All manner of sponges, jelly fishes, sea pen, sea anemones, bristled worms, mollusks, barnacles, crabs, sea cucumber etc. are to be seen at low water. The sea around the island is rich in other life forms too such as sea snakes, dolphins and at least three species of marine turtles.

## Bird Observations

To reach Byet Dwarka from Ahmedabad one has to travel to Okha first via Rajkot and Jamnagar. But from Jamnagar



itself one gets a feeling of having 'arrived'. On the route black and glossy ibis, painted storks, grey herons and moorhens are commonly sighted, especially in small wetlands. Close to Okha are extensive salt pans and on most of our visits during 1996 we saw flamingos feeding in thousands here, often in the company of painted stork and herons. Large flocks of waders especially godwits and ruff are also to be seen in the areas around the salt pans.

When you reach Okha you have definitely arrived because from here Byet Dwarka is just about 40 minutes away by a motor powered ferry boat. If you have come on a Sundervan camp then the boat will take you directly to either the Sundervan office — on one horn of this horse-shoe shaped island or to 'dunni point' — on the other horn where the camp site is located. While travelling on the boat it is interesting to watch sea-gulls following boats and often encircling them like a halo.

On Byet, the most interesting areas from the viewpoint of birding are the coastal zones. At high water not many waders will be seen but with the first signs of the turning of the tide curlews, reef herons, grey herons, oystercatchers, crab plovers and other waders start appearing. As the tide recedes further, more birds move in, including smaller waders such as ring plover, redshank, turnstone, avocet etc. Exactly where their high tide roost is, if any, is not known.

During the nights it is quite common to hear calls of waders feeding in the exposed inter-tidal zone and sometimes on clear nights we have also seen them feeding. Whether wintering waders feed at night is not in question because it would be logical to expect that those birds which inhabit the coast would follow the tidal rather than the diurnal cycle. From field researches done in other parts of the world it has been established that waders, after a pause at high water, continue feeding through the dark hours. This enables them to build up reserves for the impending migration. However, the question being asked by many ornithologists today is, at what rate do the birds feed at night, and whether this is the same or lower than day-feeding rates. Since different species of waders employ different feeding techniques and employ different sensory cues (touch or sight) it is also of interest to establish whether their strategies change while feeding during the dark hours.

Local people report that a heronry of painted storks and some other colonial waterbirds exists on one of the neighbouring islands. It will be worthwhile to document it because not many coastal nesting sites for painted storks are known (Ali and Ripley, 1983) except, of course, the heronries in Bhavnagar city (Parasharya and Naik, 1990). It is generally reckoned that at inland sites across the country, the nesting season of painted storks corresponds with the performance

and arrival of the monsoon. It would be of interest to know how well this correspondence exists for coastal nesting sites like Byet.

The coastal areas of Saurashtra and Kutch are reckoned to be on a major bird flyaway through the Indian subcontinent. To quote Salim Ali (in Khacher, 1996) it lies along: "the main route of the hordes of species that sweep into India from the north and northwest in autumn and out in the reverse direction in spring". In this regard our checklist, given in the appendix, is most probably an underestimate.

Besides being an ideal habitat for birds, Byet Dwarka is also a good, albeit lesser known, nesting habitat for sea turtles. During our surveys in 1996 we found that at least three areas on the island are frequented by female turtles. The evidence from track size, bone fragments including an intact anapsid skull suggest that these are the Olive Ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) and the Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*). When the pictures of different species of sea turtles were shown to local fisherfolk they were able to confirm their occurrence and also of the Leatherback Turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*). At Byet Dwarka sea turtle populations are mainly threatened by nest depredation due to jackals and wild boars and also by incidental catches from fishing vessels.

At present Byet appears quite unspoilt — the beaches are vast and clean, the waters clear blue. Incidentally, the beaches of this part of the western coast are totally devoid of coconut trees probably due to the high salinity of ground water and inability of the soil to retain moisture. Besides fishing and pilgrimage there are not many other activities on this island. But just a few km across the waters, on the mainland, there are several industrial and salt manufacturing units. It will not be long before these units expand and begin to influence the ecology of Byet in a strongly negative way. Indeed, many conservationists feel that the cement industries and salt production units around Okha have already started making their 'evil' presence felt.

#### Acknowledgements

We thank Mr Lavkumar Khacher for numerous insights about Byet Dwarka and its birds. We are grateful to Shri KV Sarabhai, Director CEE for encouragement.

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Note : Sundervan is an activity of the Centre for Environment Education. Information about the marine camps can be obtained by writing to Dr AJ Urli, Coordinator, Sundervan.

**Appendix**  
**Checklist of the birds of Byet Dwarka**

Common Name	Scientific Name		
Little cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>	Lesser sand plover	<i>C mongolus</i>
Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
Pond heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>	Curlew	<i>N arquata</i>
Cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Blacktailed godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
Large egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	Bartailed godwit	<i>L lapponica</i>
Smaller egret	<i>Egretta intermedia</i>	Spotted redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>
Little egret	<i>E.garzetta</i>	Redshank	<i>T totanus</i>
Indian reef heron	<i>E.gularis</i>	Greenshank	<i>T nebularia</i>
Painted stork	<i>Mycteria leucocephala</i>	Marsh sandpiper	<i>T stagnatilis</i>
White ibis	<i>Threskiornis aethiopica</i>	Green sandpiper	<i>T ochropus</i>
Black ibis	<i>Pseudibis papillosa</i>	Wood sandpiper	<i>T glareola</i>
Glossy ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	[Terek sandpiper	<i>T terek]</i>
Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	Common sandpiper	<i>T hypoleucos</i>
Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Lesser flamingo	<i>Phoeniconaias minor</i>	[Fantail snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago]</i>
Blackwinged kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>
Pariah kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	Little stint	<i>C minuta</i>
Brahminy kite	<i>Haliastur indus</i>	Temminck's stint	<i>C temminckii</i>
Indian whitebacked vulture	<i>Gyps bengalensis</i>	Dunlin	<i>C alpina</i>
Scavenger vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	Curlew-sandpiper	<i>C testacea</i>
Marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	Ruff and reeve	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	Herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Peregrine falcon	<i>Peregrinus japonensis</i>	Lesser blackbacked gull	<i>L ichthyaetus</i>
Grey partridge	<i>Francolinus pondicerianus</i>	Brownheaded gull	<i>L brunicephalus</i>
Rock bush quail	<i>Perdica argoondah</i>	Blackheaded gull	<i>L ridibundus</i>
Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	Whiskered tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>
Blackwinged stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	Caspian tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>
Avocet	<i>Recuvirostra avosetta</i>	Little tern	<i>Sterna albibrons</i>
Crab plover	<i>Dromas ardeola</i>	Indian lesser crested tern	<i>S bengalensis</i>
Redwattled lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>	Indian sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles exustus</i>
Yellow-wattled lapwing	<i>V malabaricus</i>	Blue rock pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Stone curlew	<i>Burhinus oedipnemus</i>	Indian ring dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
[Indian courser	<i>Cursorius coromandelicus]</i>	Red turtle dove	<i>S tranquebarica</i>
Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	Roseringed parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>
Golden plover	<i>P apricaria</i>	Spotted owlet	<i>Athene brama</i>
Large sand plover	<i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>	Common indian nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus asiaticus</i>
Little Ringed Plover	<i>C dubius</i>	Lesser pied kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>
Kentish Plover	<i>C alexandrinus</i>	Common kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
		Whitebreasted kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>
		Green bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>
		Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>



Redwinged bush lark	<i>Mirafra erythroptera</i>
Sandlark	<i>Calandrella raytal</i>
[Crested lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i> ]
Collared sand martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>
Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Grey shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
Black drongo	<i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>
Rosy pastor	<i>Sturnus roseus</i>
Common myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
Bank myna	<i>A. ginginianus</i>
House crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>
Jungle crow	<i>C. macrorhynchos</i>
Redvented bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>

Whitecheeked bulbul	<i>P. leucogenys</i>
Common babbler	<i>Turdoides caudatus</i>
Large grey babbler	<i>T. malcolmi</i>
Pied bush chat	<i>Saxicola caprata</i>
Indian robin	<i>Saxicoloides fulicata</i>
Magpie-robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>
Yellow wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>
White wagtail	<i>M. alba</i>
Purple sunbird	<i>Nectarinia asiatica</i>
House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Whitethroated munia	<i>Lonchura malbarica</i>

Note: Those birds which could not be fully confirmed are given in square brackets



## Chhari Dhandh — Wonderful Wetland Of Kutch

M.K. HIMMATSINHJI, Jubilee Ground, Bhuj, Kutch 370 001

I read with great interest the article of J.K. Tiwari entitled 'Avian Profile of Chhari-dhandh, Kutch, Gujarat, India', in Vol. 37, No. 1, January/February, 1997 of the Newsletter for Birdwatchers. However it appears the author either wrote the article in a hurry or he does not have all the required reference material at hand with him. Also, for some inexplicable reason he has omitted to mention that the Bird Migration Study Project at Chhari dhandh was initiated by the Bombay Natural History Society and funded by the United States Fish & Wildlife Service through the Ministry of Environment. Mr S.A. Hussain was in charge of this project and M/s. S. Asad Akhtar and J.K. Tiwari were Field Scientists working on it. The project was successful in collecting interesting data on the pattern of avian migration into Kutch. After the termination of the migration study the BNHS started the Grasslands Ecology Study in the same location with the difference that the emphasis of this project shifted from the 'dhandh' to the adjoining Banni grassland area. Thus this second project started in 1992 under the guidance of Dr. Asad R Rahmani and with J.K. Tiwari once again being the Field Scientist. Thus the continuity of the study of the birds of that area could be maintained. In other words, it went on from 1990 to 1994.

Coming back to Mr. Tiwari's article and to add to the information given by him, I may at first explain here that the 'dhandh' of Chhari is not a lake or jheel, but a natural shallow lagoon. The term 'dhandh' in Sindhi and Kutchhi denotes a shallow collection of water. Chhari is the name of a village situated nearby. This waterbody and the surrounding wetland is situated on the southern edge of a portion of the western half of the Banni grassland. It is certainly a wetland (though not permanent) that should be recognised as a Ramsar Site.

The heading 'New Ornithological Records for Kutch' in Mr. Tiwari's article is misleading. From amongst the birds listed from Nos. 1 to 11, all were recorded in Kutch some time or the other except one, the golden plover - *Pluvialis apricaria* - which although noted by Capt. Butler in the nineteenth century, was not met with since then. Mr. Tiwari should have referred to Report No. 15 of the Bombay Natural History Society's Bird Migration Study Project, particularly the part reporting the results of their camp near Jakhau port (Abdasa taluka, western Kutch) where in and around the area of the saltworks 12879 birds of 38 species were trapped and banded from December 1, 1970 to March 2, 1971. He was welcome to contact and consult Mr Shantilal Varu or this author while preparing the article. This author belongs to the old school of Dr. Salim Ali who was such a great stickler when it concerned exactness or accuracy when reporting bird records and occurrences. The account of the records of birds given in Mr. Tiwari's article differs from the information this author has with him as follows:

### 1 Blacknecked grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

This species was not met with in Kutch before the year 1984. That year on March 11 this author along with Mr Shantilal N. Varu and other members of the Pelican Nature Club of Kutch saw one bird on the Khavda (Pachham Island) village tank and two more blacknecked grebe on the same day on Devisar tank (about 15 km north of Bhuj). All the three were in winter plumage. The two birds mentioned by Mr. Tiwari were perhaps the second record of the bird in Kutch. Since then this grebe has been met with at various waterbodies, but it is not a regular migrant visitor.

### 2. Dalmatian pelican *Pelecanus philippensis*

The author does not remember having informed Mr. Tiwari of the occurrence of this species in Kutch in 1964. Actually this

pelican was first noted in the nineteenth century (Appendix A - The Birds of Kutch, Salim Ali, 1945). The first sight record of this author of the Dalmatian pelican was two of them on December 12 (1987) on Rudramata dam (14 km north of Bhuj); and then four more were met with on January 12 (1988, Don dam, west of Mandvi). As Mr. Tiwari rightly mentions, this species prefers to remain aloof from its cousin, the white or rosy pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*.

### 3. Marbled teal *Marmaronetta angustirostris*

This duck has always been very rare in this part of the country. This author went within a few days of Asad Akhtar and Tiwari reporting 200 marbled teal on the 'dhandh' but failed to meet with them. I was also of the opinion at that time that the phenomenon could be a pointer to the good result of the Lalsuharan experiment in Pakistan. Dr. Roberts considers it one of Pakistan's rarest ducks. The mention of one specimen shot in Kutch earlier refers to the one shot by my late brother, M.K. Fatehsinhji, on Bada village tank (about 22 km west of Madvi port, in the winter of 1940). More recently on January 19 (1993) five marbled teal were met with at the Devisar tank near Rudramata dam. M/s. S.N. Varu and Mohammad Hussain Khatri counted six of this duck at the same location a few days later.

### 4. Greylag goose *Anser anser*

As rightly mentioned by Mr. Tiwari, this goose was abundant during years having sufficient rainfall, particularly on the Dhandh of Chhari, in the earlier part of the Twentieth century. They used to be seen on inland jheels also in small numbers up to the early 1930s. Thereafter they stopped visiting Kutch and only one goose was seen in 1990, as mentioned by Mr. Tiwari, after a gap of nearly sixty years. According to Dr. T.J. Roberts (Birds of Pakistan, Vol. 1, 1991) the greylag is mostly absent in lower Sind. This perhaps points to two factors that may be responsible for its absence from Sind and Kutch. Firstly this species is quite intolerant of close human presence and encroachment in its habitat, being rather shy by nature, and this has happened on both sides of the border after partition of India in 1947. The second reason for the decrease in their numbers could be disturbance in their breeding grounds or the destruction of the ecosystem there. The migrant geese in Sind and the extreme western portion of India used to arrive mainly from the Arctic Tundra zone near the boreal forest of Russia and the western portions of the Central Asian steppes. A decline in the numbers of some duck species was also noticed from the late 1950s to the late 1970s. Since then with serious conservation measures initiated by the former Soviet Union there has been a progressive increase in our visiting duck populations; and some flocks of greylag geese are also being reported from certain areas of Gujarat. Of course the theories propagated above require proper investigation and confirmation.

### 5. Cinereous or Eurasian black vulture *Aegypius monachus*

Perhaps this vulture has escaped notice in Kutch over the years mainly because it is rare and it only come into the islands

in the Great Rann of Kutch and up to the Banni grassland along with the Little Rann of Kutch and its vicinity where birdwatchers do not often go. The cinereous vulture is also absent in some years. It was first recorded by Dr. Salim Ali in the Little Rann of Kutch when he saw four birds on the ground on January 3 (1946, JBNHS. Vol. 52, Nos. 2 & 3). The Birds of Kutch was already published by then, so this vulture does not find a place in it. Again, the sightings mentioned by Mr. Tiwari in 1960 came far later.

### 6. Eastern golden plover *Pluvialis dominica*

Here again, as mentioned by Mr. Tiwari, Dr. Salim Ali was the first to discover this plover at the Changdai village tank (Mandvi taluka, on March 9, 1944). The second record of January 26 (1991), coming as it did nearly 46 years later, proves that this species is a vagrant in Kutch as elsewhere in India. Dr. Roberts also described it as a vagrant in lower Sind.

### 7. Golden plover *Pluvialis apricaria*

Barring Capt. Butler's very early record, this could perhaps be considered, if not new, at least a fresh record for the later years as the species had not been met with by the various surveys and birdwatchers. I came to know about this occurrence only from the report published by the BNHS. Had I come to know about this while the birds were still in hand I would have suggested keeping at least one specimen for the collections of skins in the BNHS. Dr. Salim Ali always insisted on collecting rare or new birds recorded in a region. This plover could also be considered a vagrant. Dr. Roberts says it is a scarce winter visitor in Pakistan.

### 8. Broadbilled sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*

Tiwari claims that the single bird banded at Chhari dhandh during the Bird Migration Study Project 'was the first positive ringing record for this species from Kutch'. It seems he has over-looked the previous ringing records of the BNHS at the Jakhau saltworks in 1970-71 according to which 299 broadbilled sandpipers were banded.

The winter plumage has already been described by Tiwari, but in summer (breeding) dress, though smaller in size, this sandpiper bears a striking resemblance to the jack snipe, particularly the colour pattern of the upper parts. It is easier to identify the broadbilled sandpiper in the field in this plumage when they first arrive and also just before they start their return migration in February/March. When this author along with Shantila Varu saw three examples near Jakhau port in roadside shallow trenches on September 15 (1992) they were in their partial summer plumage, at once standing out from among the other waders present.

### 9. Curlew sandpiper *Calidris testacea*

Tiwari, in this case too, claims the banding of one bird of this species at the 'dhandh' as the first for Kutch. Whereas according to the banding record of the BNHS at Jakhau the number of curlew sandpiper ringed was 232.



### 10. Slenderbilled gull *Larus genei*

This gull has extended its range only during recent years. Dharmakumarsinhji recorded only one bird in Saurashtra for the first time over forty years ago (1955). No surveys in Kutch or Saurashtra had met with the Slenderbilled Gull previously. The credit for discovering it in any sizable numbers in the Gulf of Kutch and generally on the seaboard of Saurashtra and Kutch goes to Dr. Taej Mundkur, Lalsinh M. Raol and Shantilal N. Varu (JBNHS. Vol. 85, No. 2, Pp. 420-22).

Before then the Slenderbilled Gull was known to occur in large numbers on the coasts of Sind and Baluchistan and also on inland waterbodies there. It is known to breed irregularly in Lasbela. Tiwari has mentioned the large concentration of slenderbilled gulls off Nir on February 2 (1991), however some time prior to be along with Mr Hussain and Asad Akhtar saw these gulls on their way to and back from the Flamingo 'city'. Mr. Navin N. Bapat also saw and reported them.

This author cannot agree with Tiwari's tentative theory of these gulls changing their route of migration owing to oil spills in the Gulf (he does not specify which Gulf?). For seabirds are often known to be affected by oil slicks in various areas of the world, but that does not force them to alter their instinctual routine of migration. It is more likely that the number of these has increased on the coastal areas of Pakistan in recent times, and hence due to the competition for food etc. they have started moving in larger numbers southwards to the coastlines of Kutch and Saurashtra. If a careful watch is kept, they are likely to be found on the south Gujarat and Maharashtra coasts. In winter plumage the slenderbilled gull could easily be confused with the blackheaded gull. Now coming back to the main subject, the gathering of these gulls in large numbers, Kutch lies on the migration route of many of our winter migrant visitors. They come into this area and then spread out down the Indian peninsula. The same process is repeated on the return migration in reverse. Both ways our avian visitors have to fly over the Great Rann. Gulls tend to flock together and more so at the time of their return migration. In this case, in

1991, there was sufficient water collected at that point in the Rann to hold enough food for a large number of waterbirds and hence that large collection of slenderbilled gulls. However that does not detract from the importance of these observations which helped to demonstrate, or at least indicate, the extent of the numbers of this species and extension of its present range on the shores of Western India.

### 11. Indian skimmer *Rynchops albigollis*

The skimmer is mainly a bird of the riverine systems of the subcontinent. Perennial rivers in Kutch are nonexistent and so perhaps this species has been rare in this region. Roberts describes its status in Pakistan as rare also. Thus this species appearances have been irregular or sporadic. This author cannot understand how Tiwari has drawn the conclusion that the Indian Skimmer has 'established itself in Kutch' merely based on observations 'spread over almost two years'. The first sighting of this author of this species was in August 1947. Then again a solitary bird was observed on December 11 (1966). Some other birdwatchers have reported seeing this species also, but not regularly. It is only when a bird species settles down in an area and starts breeding regularly that a resident bird could be considered settled or established in a given region.

Though mentioned in a different context earlier, Tiwari should have included a couple of birds more in his article. In the opinion of this author the account of the Chhari Dhandh and its environs would then have been complete and even more interesting. These birds are the glossy ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* - and the grey hypocollus *Hypocollus ampelinus* - the former is often encountered on waterbodies mainly during the winter. However it was discovered breeding in a mixed heronry not too far from the dhandh by Tiwari and this was a new discovery which goes to his credit. Similarly he studied the latter in depth near Phulay village having seen it in increasing numbers from the year 1990 onwards. This again could be the extension of range of yet another species, and therefore interesting from that point of view.



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**O**n 2nd June 1996, I was back at Ramnagar, the 'Gateway' of Corbet Tiger Reserve. This was after 4 months of my maiden birding visit to this beautiful part of India. I took a 60 km deviation to Nainital for a change. I had ascended this altitude earlier near my home in the splendid Western Ghats. The avifaunal diversity of both these places was the same in terms of sightings, but obviously different in terms of species. It is a formidable challenge for a birder from down South India to identify the birds on his first visit to these mighty mountains. But this is the challenge which makes bird watching the ultimate of pleasures.

Arriving at Nainital, I occupied a small guest house in Sukha Tal, which literally means dried lake. Although the view was not the best, still it was surrounded by a few huge trees

## Birding on Treks Around Nainital

and offered fairly good birding. On the same evening the walk upto the Youth Hostel provided good sightings. I was able to photograph the beautiful red billed blue magpie (*Urocissa erythrorhyncha*) for the first time. Also I was able to listen to the melodious songs of the blue whistling thrush (*Myiophonus caeruleus*) along the way. The camps of the Youth Hostels Association of India (YHA) which is surrounded by a number of trees is a good place for birding. Back again, sitting outside my room, I was going through the local map to learn the trekking route to the nearby Naina Peak, when suddenly I noticed a small bird creeping up the huge trees in front. It was the tree creeper (*Certhia familiaris*).

At 4.30 am the next morning, I set off for the 2610 m Naina Peak (earlier known as Cheena Peak), with my 3 friends.

During the climb for the first few hundred feet, the vegetation was not dense. I could see a few yellow cheeked tits (*Parus xanthogenys*) and green-backed tits (*Parus monticolus*) which gradually began to disappear from view as the bushes and small trees gave way to large Pine trees. Also the trek now was on the Western slopes of the mountains lying to the West of Nainital town, which offered fine views of the vast stretches of Pine forests, unlike the eastern slopes from where only the Nainital township was visible.

It was getting cooler as we gained altitude. Here and there I came across the rufousbellied woodpecker (*Hypopicus hyperythrus*). The occasional song of the blue whistling thrushes and the drumming sounds of the woodpeckers echoed through the misty mountains and it was the finest music I had ever listened to. As I walked a few hundred steps ahead, I spotted a bird which except for its white neck and breast looked exactly like a black bird. It was not afraid of me even when I went about 5 to 6 meters near it. I had no difficulty in identifying the bird as a male white collared black bird (*Turdus albocinctus*). As I was within a few meters from the Naina Peak, I came across a lone Himalayan pied woodpecker (*Picoides himalayensis*). The northern end of the Naina Peak, where a forest wireless station is situated offered splendid views of the mighty snow covered peaks of the faraway Himalayas. The cool, crisp and clean air, unending stretches of mist covered mountains, melodious songs of birds ... It is one of those moments in a bird watcher's life which get embedded in his very soul.

I took the other way back to Sukha Tal, the one via the Snow view point (2270 m). The number of birds started decreasing as we descended the mountains. Also the number of tourists increased as time passed by. Birding in Himalayan hill stations has a special charm. You don't need to trek too much through a jungle to see those beautiful gems. This was the main difference between the hill stations in the Himalayas and the hill stations in South India.

A couple of questions to a group of young children 'trekking' to their schools, led me to the doors of Mr Anoop Saha, a well known bird watcher and nature photographer of this region. Mr Saha breathed new life into my knowledge of the Himalayan birds, as I learnt to identify many of them sitting in his garden. I was silently sipping a cup of hot tea when I heard the loud double whistle of a bird, 'pee-yeaouu', which was haunting me ever since I stepped into Nainital. I was amazed when Mr Saha, identified the bird as a great hill barbet (*Megalaima virens*). Amazed because of the difference in its call and that of its cousin the large green barbet (*Megalaima zeylanica*) which is the commonest of all barbets back home.

From the residence of Mr Saha on the Aryapatta hill, the walk to Land's end is not too steep. The forest is dense, hence rich in avifauna. I came across that beautiful creature, verditer flycatcher (*Muscicapa thalassina*). Although during the past couple of winters I had seen this bluish-green bird, with its distinct black patch in front of the eye, in Devarayana Durga (DD) hills near my home, I was a little hesitant to confirm it as the same species, as it was calling so melodiously; while during the winters when I saw it in DD Hills, it was dumb. My local friend cum guide Mr Yogesh Singh Bora explained to me that a walk on this road during dawn could reveal beautiful birds like the kalij pheasant (*Lophura leucomelanos*). Walking for a few more minutes and we were at Land's end situated to the South-west of Nainital. The view from here was quite enchanting. One could see the plains below, a beautiful lake 'Khrupatal' and also sadly, vast stretches of deforested areas. A few Himalayan griffon vultures (*Gyps himalayensis*) soared overhead for their daily 'bread'.

From Land's end the walk upto the 2292 m Tiffin top was quite tough but the sight of good forest cover, made up for the steep climb. I could see the whole of Nainital township and also the haze-covered distant Himalayan peaks. My friend took me through a less trudged path on the way down to Sukha Tal. The singing of a whistling thrush was broken a few times by the laughs of flocks of white throated laughing thrushes (*Garrulax albogularis*).

The next morning, I decided to trek again to Snow view. The path which I took this time was just below the ropeway. On a couple of occasions I saw the slaty headed parakeets (*Psittacula himalayana*) flying swiftly accompanied by their sweet calls. When I reached Snow view, I cursed myself for not having trekked to some other place. I took the ropeway down and reached Naini lake. 'It is biologically dead', a college student passing by remarked, but I believed it was much more than that. Rotten, absolutely rotten! Years of neglect and domestic garbage dumping by the people, mainly the tourists, has wreaked havoc with this lake's ecology.

That evening, my last in Nainital, took me to Hanumangarhi Temple, about half an hour's walk from Sukha Tal. As is well known the sunset here is spectacular. Unending stretches of the Himalayan foothills changed their colour with every passing minute. I had seen more than 100 species of birds during the past 3 days, 14 of them for the first time.

As I turned back towards Sukhatal, my last view was of a lonely Himalayan griffon vulture soaring overhead, and disappearing, like the orange sun behind the high Himalayan peaks.



## COMMENTS ON PREVIOUS ARTICLES

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### Is this serious enough?

Through several issues we have been reading a subdued criticism of the matter appearing in the Newsletter and despite the Editor's rather terse reminder "that further general

comments were not welcome" I hazard to use the subject to advantage by asking the readers, specially those with a scientific bent of mind as to how many have taken note of these spotlights in the editorial of Vol.37, No.2, March/April 1997? The first is on Bustards and Eucalyptus, the second is Birds of the Indian grasslands and the third refers to my friend Prakash Gole's article in the Journal of Ecological Society, Vol.9, 1996 concerning man's position in the present day scenario of degraded countrysides, plants and animals being

passed to the brink of extinction and the fludgeoning human population in a quasi-democratic society. The three issues need our very serious concern and the articulation of opinions needing considerable amount of soul searching.

Let me warn you that in each case you will find yourselves arriving at very uncomfortable decisions which may isolate you from the countrywide environmentalists' guild; you will be questioning the holy Grail, you will be seriously rocking the boat. I should know, because I have been trodding a terribly lonely road for decades. I have been an "untouchable" among with the strong vested interests of the forest departments — the establishment on the one hand, and I am distanced from the noisome activists who are busy assailing the strongholds of big government and big industry. My scientist friends have tended to feel uncomfortable in my company because they realise they have been tardy in questioning, and in warning against, the large scale plantations and manipulative afforestation programmes being practised by government and non-government agencies. I shall take each of the issues referred to above and request the Editor to give me space.

The article on great Indian bustards at Ranibennur has very personal memories. It was in the early 1980s, that Shri Futehally, then Vice-President of WWF India asked me to visit the sanctuary. In my report I had been critical of the eucalyptus plantation and this was not received well by the powers that be in Bangalore and Zafarbhay will recollect my recommendations being pooh-poohed by even conservations in Karnataka! Had the eucalyptus been cleared and grasslands actively maintained then Ranibennur would have had a thriving GIB population — and, the Karnataka Forest Department would have had several bustard feathers in their caps! In my own home state Gujarat, there were many known Bustard areas but today the Bustard sanctuaries which had been notified are unfit for the species, either because they have been over run by domestic livestock or by thickets of *Prosopis chilensis*. Gujarat, in all probability, has lost its Bustards. This brings me to the next article on Indian grasslands.

Saurashtra and Kachchh regions of Gujarat had magnificent grasslands. My home area of Jasdan in the undulating heartlands of Saurashtra had some of the most beautiful grasslands that had been lovingly nurtured for generations to acquire a distinctive characteristic of their own. They were the home of what had developed into a very distinctive fauna. Since we are a NL for birdwatchers, I mention the birds: singing bush larks, sky larks, sykes and Franklin's crested larks, during winter huge swarms of short-toed larks, Indian pipits, and their migratory generic brethren, yelloweyed babblers, jungle wren warblers, Indian or plain wren warblers, Franklin's wren warblers, streaked fantailed warblers, baya weavers, rain quails, rock bush quails, grey and painted partridges and bustard quails. These very distinctive grassland communities, provided the ambience to the lesser florican and the great Indian bustard. The large concentrations of bird species drew predatory falcons and raptors, the commonest being the elegant blackwinged kite and in winter the kestrels.

Eagles were a constant presence keeping a watch for snakes and lizards as well as grasshoppers. Kashmir rollers dallied in these prey-rich areas during their autumn passage grasslands of Western India, specially after the monsoon rains, were rich bird areas over which swept three species of harriers and so many besides. All this kaleidoscopic avian presence has become a fading set of memories being replaced by tangled *Prosopis* or barren lunar landscapes. The impoverished avian communities are poignant counterfoils of the pauperised pastoral economics of the region and a disgraceful commentary on the land management by those who claim to be experts. Rahmani has done well to throw light on the immense wastage of valuable resources on social forestry and wasteland development and in indicating the need to encourage natural regeneration. Coming from a "scientist" perhaps our decision makers will take cognisance which they disdainfully did not when warned by a mere naturalist. The NL being an amateurs' publication has done what, unhappily prestigious scientific journals seem not to want — viz call a spade a spade. And this brings us to the latest tune of the environmentalists' by and wagon orchestra — "is man a part of Biodiversity" the less I say the better but I will end by making an emphatic statement that man no longer is part of biodiversity. Unless he becomes the keeper of Biodiversity, he is the direct destroyer of the land's biological vitality. Until we all can arrive at a consensus, human beings cannot be given any rights within the beleaguered wilderness pockets.

#### Redtailed Chat in Malda?

Samiran Jha's Redtailed Chat (NL Vol.37, No.2) needs a question mark — Malda is too far west for this species which even in Gujarat is not so common, and besides, *Oenanthe xanthopyrmyna* does not shiver its tail like a redstart. I suggest he gives his birds a further scrutiny next winter.

I would also like to question his identification of a whitebellied sea eagle. The raptor he saw might possibly be an osprey. Whitebellied sea eagles are very distinctive birds and fairly noisy and when attacking another eagle they constantly utter a characteristic "Keuch- Keuch- Keuch- " I should know since I lived 150<sup>0</sup> away in a hide with a pair, on a small island for several days.

#### Watertowl in Kota

This is with reference to "Summer Breeding of Waterfowl in Kota" NLBW, Vol.37, No.1, January/February 1997, pages 10 and 12. This is the sort of stuff we are badly in need of and I greatly look forward to more such write ups from the growing number of birdwatchers. What I would like to draw attention to is to Rakesh and Nair's " ... observations suggest that *eucalyptus* and *prosopis* trees are not preferred by the tree nesting waterfowl provided other trees are available". There is one slip — the table of "preference of trees for nesting" might indicate that jacanas are tree nesters. Otherwise a very good article.

Asad Rahmani's observations on the Mallard need a response. The mallard has become more plentiful in Gujarat

— the person who can throw more light on this is Dr B Parasharya who spends a lot of time looking over a number of waterbodies as a part of his research work.

An interesting increase in Gujarat over the last few years has been flocks of greylag geese which half a century ago was recorded as rare. Correspondingly, TJ Roberts reports a decline of the greylag in Sindh (JBNHS, Vol.93, 1996). Any guess as to why the shift? This was first reported by Parasharya some years ago.

#### European Bee-eater in Tamil Nadu

I am not too happy with the identification of the European bee-eater in Tamil Nadu. As described, the birds seem to be chestnut headed bee-eaters. I would have been happier if the recorders had written "We suspect the birds to be European bee-eaters" instead of "Undoubtedly it was the European bee-eater". I remember clearly the great ornithologist Horace Alexander identifying a raptor flying overhead as "possibly a pariah kite", and believe me, with a life time ahead of birdwatching our younger acolytes have nothing to lose by being cautious.

#### Juvenile koels

And finally, to continue with the exchange on Darters, could V Santharam please send in the names of sites in Gujarat? I could indicate these on an outline map of the State. Incidentally, Gujarat is perhaps one of the most important wetland area in South Asia, a fact which needs to be recognised as such.

Mrs Pragati Nayak obviously saw juvenile koels being "cold shouldered" by their foster parents. All young birds continue to pester their parents long after they have left the nest and are free flying.

#### Whitebreasted kingfisher

Riki Krishnan's "Unexpected Guest" must have arrived to catch some gecko or a garden lizard; perhaps cockroaches or crickets or even a mouse. Whitebreasted kingfishers are opportunists and as such faring well in an otherwise unfriendly environment of polluted rivers and sewage laden lakes.

#### The Golden Crow

How wonderful to have golden crows! While collecting the first specimen may be justified, (though I would not have "collected" the bird) why did Shri Imam feel the need to collect the second bird? A specimen residing in BNHS's collection and a note in the Journal should suffice for the purpose of science. Lets have the golden crow now alive to reproduce more of its kind. A living golden crow is worth millions, one in the hand is just so much feathers. A photograph on the NL's cover would be thrilling.

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#### Great Indian Bustard in Ranibennur

Please refer to an article 'A Bustard's Nest at Ranibennur' (Vol. 37, No. 2, pp 22-23) by Mr S.G. Neginhal, and your editorial comments 'The Bustard and Eucalyptus' (pp 21). Mr Neginhal has played a crucial role in highlighting the presence

of bustards in Karnataka. His papers published in the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* and elsewhere have been a valuable source of information. During my studies on the great Indian bustard, I visited Ranibennur four or five times but could not do any intensive studies. However, on the basis of our studies in Solapur (Maharashtra), Karera (Madhya Pradesh), Desert National Park (Rajasthan) and Rollapadu (Andhra Pradesh), we had recommended to the Karnataka Forest Department to clear up some patches of Eucalyptus and convert them into grasslands, which fortunately the Forest Department has now done. As expected, bustards have colonised these grassland patches. I am sure, if these grasslands are maintained, bustards will successfully breed and hopefully increase in number.

There are always some small populations surviving here and there. As soon as some grasslands are developed, they colonize them. We have seen revival of bustards, albeit in small numbers, in Solapur, in Kutch and in Kurnool (Rollapadu). Along with bustards, many other grassland-dependent species also benefit.

Here I want to caution the Forest Department not to give too much emphasis on protection of individual nests. No attempt should be made to search the nests. Sometimes photographers and curious birdwatchers are the worst enemies of bustards (and other rare birds). If we create suitable habitat for bustards, they will colonize it and breed. One or two nests will be destroyed by natural causes, which should not worry us. Our emphasis should be on protection and maintenance of bustard habitat and effective measures against poaching. The great Indian bustard is a long living, but a slow breeding bird. Even if a hen bustard is able to raise 4-5 chicks in her life time, the population will be maintained. In Solapur and Rollapadu, we found heavy mortality of eggs and chicks but still the population increased mainly because the habitat was well maintained by the Forest Department and some hens were able to raise chicks.

Although, in the *Handbook* it is mentioned that bustards chiefly nest from March to September, it is not unusual to find nests in other months. We regularly found nests in winter in Rollapadu. Sometimes, late nesters or first time nesters, lay eggs in the so-called non-breeding season.

We found that the incubation period is nearly 30 days but some eggs which did not hatch, even after a long incubation, were found broken. We suspect these were spoiled eggs, abandoned by the hen and broken by a predator such as a mongoose, fox or a crow. Predators generally do not eat spoiled eggs, but from outside it is not easy to tell whether the egg is spoiled or not. We have found that broken, spoiled eggs give extremely offensive smell, which perhaps no predator would tolerate. That is why they leave the spoiled egg remains untouched.

In your editorial comments, you have written that "there have been suggestions that in periods of unusual drought bustards break open the eggs to drink the liquid". To me it appears to be untrue. The great Indian bustard can live in extreme harsh arid conditions, with practically no surface water for 8-10 months or even longer (during consecutive

drought years). Animals have a much better acuity than us to perceive the coming weather conditions and adjust accordingly. Droughts do not come suddenly. Moreover, drought and arid conditions are common in bustard areas, not an exception so the bustards are adapted to such conditions. We found that they would skip breeding in a drought year, rather than invest in an egg (bustard generally lay one egg) and then break it open to drink its content! I do not know any other bird of arid zone drinking its own egg, so why should a bustard do this?

I think, this fallacy has arisen due to the fact that domestic chicken sometimes breaks its own egg. But we must remember that domestic chicken lives in extreme stressful condition, especially in the crowded modern hatcheries which results in this abnormal behaviour.

#### Importance of Key Words

For the last few years we have been working on the bibliography of the avifauna of the Indian subcontinent. This bibliography is based on the references (up to 1994) supplied by Tim Inskipp of the Oriental Bird Club but we have made numerous modifications and have added key words for easy retrieval. These key words are based on species and/or group of birds (e.g. whiteheaded babbler, or storks), subject (e.g. foraging, status, breeding, etc.) region (Western Ghats, Brahmaputra Valley, Arid zone, etc), state (e.g. Madhya Pradesh, Kerala etc) and country (India, Bangladesh, etc). For adding relevant key words, we have gone through numerous papers on Indian birds (the process is still going on). We certainly could not get and read all the papers. In such cases we have tried to enter the key words based on the title. Some titles are very explicit. For instance, 'Display flight of the male Monal Pheasant' or 'Sighting of Ring-tailed Fishing Eagle at Vihar Lake, Bombay', but some titles are quite vague, for instance, 'Notes on some birds' or 'curious behaviour'. We could not decide the key words of such references without reading the paper (nor always accessible to us).

In this age of information flow and over-specialization, no one can read all the literature published, so one has to be choosy. Therefore, clear and explicit title, an unambiguous abstract and key words greatly help in sorting out what to read (and keep) and what not to read.

These days we are entering post-1994 references on birds of the Indian subcontinent as and when they are published. The 'Newsletter' is a great source of interesting articles. However, even after reading some papers, we find it difficult to enter all the key words because of inadequate information about site, district, region or even species. We have the latest issue (vol.36, no.6, 1996) in hand from which we have entered all the papers/notes in our bibliography. We have few suggestions for future contributors and also for the editor.

1. Scientific names of all the species mentioned in the text should be given at least when first time described. For instance, in the interesting article 'Waterfowl census around Surat, Gujarat', it is mentioned that 4,000 pochards were seen. Our query is, 'which species of pochard?'

In another article by Aasheesh Pittie, the title it is *Black Breasted Weaver Birds* but in the text, the name of the species is *Blackbreasted Weaver*. Similarly, in another

article by Maneesh Kumar and Manoj Kumar (pages 113-14), the bird is mentioned as *Christmas Frigate Bird* *Fregata andrewsi*. The 'old' name was Christmas Island Frigate Bird but the new name is Christmas Frigatebird and not Frigate bird.

In her article on the 'Birds of Sampe (Mysore)', Mrs Pragati Nayak mentions seeing robins near her house. The true robin *Erithacus rubecula* is found in Europe. We are sure, she must have seen Indian robin *Saxicoloides fulicata* and not the robin.

2. We request that in all the articles, sites should be properly described. A small town may be well-known locally or even in the state but outside, people may not know it. If coordinates of sites are not possible to give, then at least the nearest well-known town or taluka or district must be given. It helps us in entering the key words about region and state.
3. Date and time of observation may not be very important for our bibliography, but it is useful for other researchers and also for keeping track on census. In the article 'Waterfowl census around Surat, Gujarat', it is mentioned 'Our Club carried out the annual waterfowl census on 11 sites this year'. What was the year?
4. Sometimes even simple observations could be very important. We would like to refer to a very interesting observation by Mrs Pragati Nayak (page 115) of a woodpecker going in from one hole and coming out from another. Fortunately, she has mentioned that the holes were made by the goldenbacked woodpecker. Any one working in woodpeckers, especially on the goldenbacked, would find this behaviour very informative.

#### Reference omitted in Grassland Article

Please refer to a section from my paper, published in Newsletter (vol.37, No.2, pp 24-25). You have omitted most of the references from the Reference section, although they are mentioned in the text. If any reader wants these references, he/she can write to me directly.

**V SANTHARAM, 68, I Floor, Santhome High Road, Madras 600 028**

#### Woodpeckers nesting in earthen walls

I read with great interest Takur Dalip Singh's account of the lesser goldenbacked woodpecker nesting in an earthen wall (NLBW, 36(6), 111, Nov/Dec 1996) accompanied by an excellent photograph of the female bird at the nest entrance. Apart from the novelty that the nest was placed on an earthen wall, another interesting feature was that it was placed just 3.5 ft (about a metre) from the ground. According to Lester Short (Woodpeckers of the World), nests are located 2-10 metres (usually 3 to 7 metres) from the ground. During my study of woodpeckers at the Peechi-Vazhani wildlife sanctuary, I came across 7 nests ranging in height from about 3 to 15 m with a mean height of about 8 metres.



I cannot recollect any publication on the use of earthen walls for nesting by any Indian woodpecker. But readers may be interested to know that there are some woodpeckers that are almost entirely terrestrial — the African ground woodpecker (*Geocolaptes olivaceus*) of South Africa, the Andean flicker (*Colaptes rupicola*) of Western South America and the Campo flicker (*Colaptes campestris*) of Central South America. These are known to nest on rocky ledges, cliff faces, stream banks, road cuts and if available on dead trees or stubs. These tunnels may range, in length, from about 50-150 cms. The Andean flicker is known to excavate into abandoned and sometimes even occupied adobe huts of Indians for roosting. According to short "some collapsing buildings are pock-marked with several scores of these flicker holes, which normally penetrate the surface, then abruptly turn to one side".

Last December, at the Wildlife Conservation Society Asia Region programme meeting in Mysore, I met Dr William Robichaud who informed me that in Laos, he had come across unverified reports about the great slaty woodpecker (*Mulleripicus pulverulentus*) nesting on earthen banks from local field assistants.

#### "New Records" need more details

I was happy to find responses to the note I had written on the quality of articles published in the *Newsletter*. I particularly found the response from my former colleagues at SACON interesting. I do agree with the views they have expressed in the third paragraph justifying the need for publishing rare records of birds (NLBW, 37(1) Jan/Feb 1997).

I would, however, like to clarify that I would be the last person to "deny the presence of a tiger within a tiger sanctuary even if I myself haven't seen one" (going by the analogy given by Gokula et al). But in my note, I had only pointed out cases where birds have been sighted well out of their known ranges (i.e. records of tiger well outside the tiger sanctuary). Unfortunately birds are not as distinct as the tiger to be identified without any doubts.

In most of the cases that I had listed out, the sight reports are most casual, forming part of a checklist of a region or campus without any further details. No information is given about the date, time, number of birds seen, the field marks that were used to distinguish the birds, the activity of the bird, the habitat where it was seen and such other details. In many cases it is even doubtful if the people who reported the birds were aware that they were new records for their region.

It is essential that one has to not only convince oneself on the correct identity of the bird but also convince the readers. For this one has to present his observations giving as much details as possible on the rare birds. I enclose a specimen of such a note, hoping birdwatchers would use this as a model while reporting new records, in future.

#### Little Swift in Co. Cork: a species new to Ireland and Britain

On the evening of 12 June 1967, on Cape Clear Island, Co. Cork, I was sitting on top of a steep ridge overlooking

Cummer, a narrow col situated between the north and south harbours. The soft evening light was directly behind me and it was perfectly calm. I was casually watching five or six Swallows *Hirundo rustica*, a House Martin *Delichon urbica* and five Swifts *Apus apus* which were hawking for insects through the col, when I spotted a swift with a gleaming white throat, contrasting with black underparts. This bird passed several times about 10 feet [3 metres] above and 30 yards (27 metres) away from me. Other features distinguishing it from the Swifts were its shorter wings and less deliberate, more 'fluttery' wing beats. The bird then flew lower, passing 30 feet [9 metres] below me and 60 yards [55 metres] away, and I saw that it had a very marked, square, white rump and that its upper-parts were a glossier black than those of the Swifts. I watched it for about five minutes as it hawked back-and-forth, sometimes below me and sometimes above me, but it apparently departed (along with the Swifts) while I was busy writing field notes, for only the hirundines were present when I tried to relocate it.

#### Description

The following details are derived from my field notes and sketches. *Upper-parts*: forehead appearing paler than rest of head, probably grayish-white; rump white, a large, square, gleaming patch like that of House Martin; rest of upper-parts less sooty, glossier and blacker than those of Swift. *Under-parts*: chin and throat white, a clear-cut gleaming patch larger than in Swift (the pale chins of the Swifts were not showing up in the same light conditions); rest of under-parts blackish, except for paler under-wing. *Shape*: wings less pointed and shorter than those of Swift; tail square-ended and held more splayed. *Size*: smaller than Swift (difficult to determine with the birds flying at different heights and ranges, but particular attention was paid to this point). *Behaviour*: did not associate particularly with the Swifts and came lower, sweeping over the ground at about 20 feet [6 metres]; wing-beats less deliberate than those of Swift and more fluttery.

#### Identification

The bird was clearly no swift on the British and Irish list and I suspected that it was *Apus affinis*. But the only reference to that species (under the now obsolete name of 'White-rumped Swift'), which was available at the observatory, was in the *Field Guide* (1964 edition), where there was the bald statement, 'Smaller than common Swift, which it resembles except for almost square tail and white rump'. Since there was no reference to the very conspicuous white throat patch and I knew that there were other white-rumped swifts to be taken into account, I immediately sent my notes to Major R.F. Ruttledge so that comparison with the literature could be made. In the event, however, certain identification as a Little Swift (this name superseding 'White-rumped Swift' for *A. affinis*) came through discussion with I.J. Ferguson-Lees when I returned to England a fortnight later. The field characters of this and similar species have since been described in detail by Ferguson-Lees (1967).



My field notes and sketches have been examined by M.P.L. Fogden, Dr. C.H. Fry and D.I.M. Wallace (all of whom are familiar with this and other white-rumped species of swift), in addition to I.J. Ferguson-Lees, Major R.F. Rutledge, and the Records Committee of the British Ornithologists Union. Despite the present debate over the identity of the white-rumped swifts nesting in southern Spain (Allen and Brudenell-Bruce, 1967; Benson et al., 1968; Milstein, 1968; Fry and Elgood, 1968), all are agreed that the Cape Clear Island bird was *A. affinis*. The three species of swifts with white rumps most likely to occur in Britain and Ireland are the Little Swift, the White-rumped Swift *A. caffer* and the Horus Swift *A. horus*. The latter two are both larger than *affinis* and both have very deeply forked tails (often appearing pointed in flight), whereas *affinis* has a short square-ended tail. The broad white rump patch is also diagnostic of *affinis*. All these differences have been dealt with in more detail by Ferguson-Lees (1967) and by Fry and Elgood (1968).

BIRD COUNT - Humphrey M. Dobinson. Penguin Books (1976)



## CORRESPONDENCE

### REPORT ON THIRD BIRD WATCHING TRIP TO KHIJADIA BIRD SANCTUARY, COMMANDER CHALAPATI, INS Valsura, Jamnagar

- 1 "Destination Khijadia" now seems to be the buzz word for nature lovers of Valsura. Every visit to the bird sanctuary has triggered off interest in first timers and has added new dimensions for the regulars.
- 2 The third visit to Khijadia was organised by the Nature Club on 2 March 1997. Although, the members were asked to be ready to leave by 0545 hrs on a Sunday morning, the response was overwhelming. Two jeeps and a bus were packed with enthusiasts and left Valsura under the cover of dark to reach the sanctuary before the break of dawn. As we reached, behold what a sight it was! Flocks and flocks of demoiselle cranes greeted us. The sight was a splendour. As the twilight hour approached the 'croaks' of the demoiselles increased and as if according to a preplanned operation, they started taking off at regular intervals in large flocks for their food gathering. For those uninitiated to the hobby of bird-watching, the introduction could not have been more spectacular.
- 3 That was not all, as we turned our eyes to the North and East, the plethora of bird life was indeed a feast to the eye. An early spoonbill made its appearance and was busy scanning the waters. It reminded the shippies of Sonar Sweeps. A lazy grey heron would hardly move, waiting for its prey to come to it rather than reach for it. The typical calls of the lapwings was distinguishable all around. The flight of flamingoes was one act that impressed one and all. How majestic as they glide down, take a sharp turn and

then touch down. It is so fantastic that our pilots would do well to watch them. The terns, the gulls were a plenty as were the stilts and ruff and reeves. A lonely reef heron sat quietly at the farther end. The huge flocks of pelicans were engrossed in their own world in distinguishable flocks. A lonely kingfisher in its turquoise blue coat and deep chocolate head was a contrast to the colors of the other water birds.

- 4 The participants were exhorted not to leave garbage behind and to observe silently. The handouts given prior to the visit on the birds to look out for proved very handy. The session ended by 0845 hrs with a sense of satisfaction for the organizers and the participants. The Avian visitors from far off lands would soon be gone but the interest generated by the visit will ensure that there will certainly be a few bird lovers to welcome them when they return next winter. For them it will be "If Spring comes can winter be far behind!".



CRANES AND BUSTARDS. LT GENERAL BALJIT SINGH, 'Sakhua', PO McCluskie Ganj (Dt Ranchi) 829 208

### Cranes in Coorg.

This is in response to Lt General BC Nanda's interesting observation, on cranes in the Sky over Coorg seen by him on 08 Dec 1996 (NLBW, Vol.36, No.6).

I guess the readers of NLBW know that the BNHS had published "A Century of Natural History" in 1983 on the occasion of the Society's Centenary celebrations. A few days ago, I had pulled out this book from our book-shelves for random reading. I chanced to open the book at EG Pythian - Adam's article "Jungle Memories" (BNHS Vol.50, 1951) and mid-way read that he had shot demoiselle cranes in 1924, not far from Coorg. Here is an extract from page 179 of the Book:

"In 1924 I retired and settled in the Nilgiris, where still more varieties were added to my list; grey junglefowl, spur fowl (both common and painted), peafowl and Nilgiri pigeons. And in Mysore the great Indian bustard, green imperial pigeons, bar-headed geese, and *demoiselle cranes*".

I cannot restrain myself but also quote the next two sentences for their sheer pleasure of good prose and nostalgia: "Shooting in the Nilgiris certainly has an attraction of its own, not so much on account of the bags, which are generally small, but because of the delightful surroundings and the wonderful freshness of the air especially when there is a sharp frost. There is something about it that not even the Himalayas can equal".

Coming back to General BC Nanda's observation. Of course the above extract is no direct evidence per se of demoiselle cranes over Coorg skies but the geophysical proximity of Pythian-Adams shooting record in Mysore lends credibility to such a speculation.

Indians born post 1970 may never have seen in the Mysore region all the birds listed by Pythian-Adams? I also wonder if

my young countrymen retain the gene of wander-lust to roam their country from the Himalayas to the Nilgiris and the genetic good fortune of *Homo-sapiens* to register flavours such as "the wonderful freshness of the air" in the Nilgiris which "not even the Himalayas can equal".

#### Houbara Bustard at Sorsen (Rajasthan)

I had recounted my memorable encounter with seven great Indian bustard (GIB) during a single visit to the proposed sanctuary at Sorsen in March/April 1989 (NLBW, Vol.36, No.5, page 94).

I was hoping, though tongue-in-cheek, to hear from readers of NLBW from around Sorsen (Kota-Bundi) that the GIB have set up a permanent home at Sorsen. But what I heard from Mr Rakesh Vyas (Kota) only adds to anxiety at the declining habitats. Here is the account from Mr Vyas:

"I am sorry to inform you that Mar/Apr 1989 was the last time when breeding of GIB was recorded from Sorsen and finding 7-8 birds was a common thing. Now we see 2-3 birds on each visit and breeding has not taken place. The sightings of black buck, chinkara, fox, wolf and water-fowls have improved, but the numbers of sarus cranes in seepage marshes is dwindling fast ..."

It would be cynical if I were to berate or limit the purpose and pleasures of bird watching to just check-lists. In the prevailing conditions of declining habitats today and in the foreseeable future, should not the army of bird watchers in India set out a higher purpose for themselves and also commit themselves to attain it? The challenge of retaining and maintaining habitats is clearly no longer in the domain of Government agencies. It is time that citizens individually and collectively thought of ways and means to fulfil their constitutional obligation enshrined in Article 51A(g). The vision and execution of an ornithological enterprise (a bird sanctuary) at the late J. Krishnamurti's Rishy Valley School has a good message for positive action by birders in all walks of life everywhere in the country. Even in "developed" countries where environmental conditions are comparatively stable, citizen groups often match the good acts of their governments as I notice from the TV coverage of "Nature Conservancy" body in USA on the Discovery Channel. That is the kind of effort that bird watchers must focus upon creating all over India. Is anyone listening?



#### THE RANGE OF THE EUROPEAN BEE-EATER.

T W HOFFMANN, Ceylon Bird Club, PO Box 11, Colombo Sri Lanka

I refer to the paper by Joshua et al. in your Newsletter, Vol.37, No.1 (p.15). The European bee-eater, *Merops apiaster*, was first recorded in Sri Lanka in February 1993 in the south-eastern dry zone of the Island. Since then it has been reported annually and as many as eight birds were observed in March 1994 in the Moneragala hills, some miles inland from the first observation. Since then several birds of this species

have been noted every winter, and the bird could by now be regarded as a scarce winter visitor in very small numbers. Reference is made to my paper in the JBNHS, Vol.93(3), p.382.

Under the circumstances it is likely that the European bee-eater would also be more frequently seen during winter in the southern parts of India.



**PROJECT : HAIRCRESTED DRONGO. AASHEESH PITTIE,**  
8-2-545 "Prem Parvat", Road No.7, Banjara Hills,  
Hyderabad 500 034, India

At the outset, congratulations on being presented the Salim Ali International Award for Nature Conservation!

In the last issue of *Pitta* (#72), I mentioned in the editorial about a haircrested drongo *Dicrurus hottentottus* which came into my garden miraculously one morning, and was seen sipping nectar from a flowering coral tree. I thought (and wrote as much) that if birdwatchers from across the country kept (or have been keeping) notes of the arrival and departure dates of their sightings of this particular species and also notes on the flowering of *Erythrina* and silk cotton trees, we could perhaps draw an interesting picture about not just the distribution of this bird but also establish the relationship between it and the flowering trees, thereby understanding its local movements better.

I was pleasantly surprised when I received a letter from Mr JC Daniel (Hon Sec, BNHS) a few days ago, commenting upon this part of my editorial, with a list of areas and dates on which specimens (of the haircrested drongo) in the Society's collection, were collected.

I think that a small and very interesting project for the readers of the *Newsletter* could be started on the same theme. Readers should send their observations of the haircrested drongo — date of observation, situation of bird, presence/absence of any species of flowering trees in the vicinity of the observation and the behaviour of the bird *vis-a-vis* the flowering trees. If we receive observations from across the country, a very interesting pattern could emerge. Perhaps a reader would like to volunteer the coordination and compilation of this data. His/her address should be published in the subsequent issue of the *Newsletter* to facilitate communication between the observer and the coordinator. Findings could be published in the *Newsletter* after a year.



**WAGTAILS AND SNIPE IN COORG. LT GEN BC NANDA,**  
President, Coorg Wildlife Society, Madikeri 571 201, Kodagu,  
Karnataka

For months now the grey wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*) has been visiting my Garden and giving us many hours of pleasure watching this elegant little bird. On 9th March I observed a very well fed and almost plump wagtail in my garden. It appeared

to have accumulated fat for his long flight to his summer home in the North. I have not spotted any more birds since that day.

There was a belief amongst sportsmen of yore that this particular bird, grey wagtail and the pintail snipe (*Gallinago stenura*) arrive and depart Coorg together. Incidentally the local name for this snipe in Coorg is Bandu-Koneya (Mud squatter) as recorded by Rev G Richter in 1870.

Are there any reports to indicate that the migration dates of these two species coincide?

On first April 1997 while crossing a paddy field I disturbed a snipe and as I got across to the far bank a grey wagtail was making short dashes catching insects. It is clear that these birds have not yet migrated from Coorg although they have left my garden.



**DANCE OF THE LESSER GOLDENBACKED WOODPECKER.** DR. D BAROOAH, Dass Pharmacy, Temple Road, Sibsagar 785 640, Assam

On seeing a pair of lesser goldenbacked woodpeckers on the trunk of a roadside shade tree in Rajmai Tea Estate (8km east of Sibsagar) at 6'30 am on 2.11.97 on my way to Panidihing with Mr Dilip Borhtakur, I parked my car 50 mtrs away to observe the birds. To our pleasant surprise the birds came down on to the broad grassland, clipped very short by stray cattle, by the side of the road (N.H. 37). The male bird started dancing by dipping its head repeatedly, not unlike the mallard, but a little faster, at about one beat per second. Immediately thereafter the female responded and they danced with little side to side hops for 5 minutes oblivious of the cars and trucks passing by. The birds were silent throughout. The appearance of a curious young man stopped the activity and the birds flew to the trunk of a shade tree. They climbed in "follow the leader fashion" to the canopy, and then flew to another tree.

We checked the Compact Handbook by Ali & Ripley (Bird No. 819) and found that though the species has been reported "commonly to descend to the ground and hops about picking-up ants and crawling insects" there was no mention of the delightful dance that we've observed. Further, the dance we saw could not be a breeding display, as the time was quite distant from the birds' nesting period.



**BIRDS IN MY GARDEN.** Mrs PRAGATI NAYAK, Aashirwad, Sampe, P.O. Aryapu, Puttur 574 210

Ever since I received your letter in which you mentioned that humming-birds do not exist in India, I have been feeling rather silly and stupid. Anyway, whatever the creature is, it is very fast and we - myself and my husband and sons - have not been able to catch it in spite of trying several times. I read in a book (My Family and Other Animals) about an insect called the humming-bird moth. Maybe that is the thing then.

I would like to tell you about some nesting activity which I noticed around my house this spring. From the second half of February, I began to notice a pair of mynas at an abandoned woodpeckers nest-hole. Over the years, woodpeckers and barbets have between them gouged out five nest holes one above the other in an areca tree near our gate. Now it appeared that the block of flats was being let for tenants. Highly excited about their new dwelling, the mynas made no secret about their decision to start a family. Normally garrulous, these birds became even more so as they let the whole world know that they had decided to settle down together. I had fun watching their nest-building efforts. The whole day the birds would stuff the hole with twigs, dried leaves, bark and all sorts of rubbish - fluffs of dust, hair, paper and once even a large piece of plastic which stuck out and swayed in the breeze. Every now and then, one or the other of the birds would land at the hole and be shocked to discover that the nest had vanished. It would sit dazed for a few seconds before realizing that it had landed at the wrong hole and would then fly to the correct one.

It so happened that one day the woodpecker came to its old hole to roost. Shocked at finding its bedroom turned into a rubbish dump, it began to unceremoniously hurl everything out. Soon the ground under the tree was littered with all the things the mynas had spent several days collecting. The next morning all hell broke loose when the mynas discovered their nest destroyed. They spent a large part of the morning squeaking and chattering dementedly and I felt sorry for them. However, I noticed that by afternoon they had started collecting things again. At dusk the woodpecker returned and promptly destroyed the mynas' nest. The next morning, the mynas philosophically re-started their activities after mourning the destruction of their nest for a couple of hours.

This went on for several days - the mynas would religiously spend the whole day collecting things for the nest and at nightfall the woodpecker would almost gleefully pull out all the bark and twigs and hurl them to the ground. Undeterred, the mynas would resume their activities the following day. I wondered when the mynas would realise that the hole belonged to the woodpecker. However, as it turned out, it was the woodpecker which finally understood that some other birds had taken over its hole and it stopped coming. The mynas were able to raise their brood in peace after that.

I had always been eager to hang a bird-house in our garden and this year I was finally able to persuade my husband to get one made. He made a most beautiful one. It has a double roof so that it remains cool and has small ventilating holes at the back apart from the entrance hole in the front. In the first week of March we hung this wooden house in a guava tree in the garden. Within a few days I noticed some magpie-robins curiously entering the house or perching on the tiny perch outside the entrance hole. Soon I realized that there were two pairs of them who wanted to nest there. The males decided to fight it out. It was curious to see the way they puffed out their feathers and "charged" at each other while the females watched from a distance, each probably cheering her own

mate. For a few days the area around the guava tree was full of magpie-robin calls. The males would keep calling - one from the bird-house, the other from a perch a few feet away. Then would start their "fight". This went on intermittently throughout the day for several days. Then all activity abruptly ceased.

One afternoon I noticed a tree-pie perching at the bird-house and peeping in. It stuck its head in completely and then flew off before I could see if it had anything in its beak. A crow also tried its best to enter the house. Unfortunately for it, the small branches and twigs around the house were too small to hold its weight and it was unable to perch on the house perch. It spent quite some time exploring all possible approaches from the back, the top and even tried to make a direct dash at the entrance hole, but all in vain. By the first week of April, I began to notice a male magpie-robin perched outside the house everyday and singing there every evening.

Presumably, the bird-house had been taken over by a magpie-robin couple. The tree-pie and crow had been after the eggs and the male outside the house was probably guarding the house (eggs) when the female was away. By the second week of April, both the male and female birds could be seen at the bird-house all day either entering or leaving or perching outside. Obviously the young had hatched.

At the end of April, I saw the young birds poke their heads out of the hole to take a peep at the world. All three had dull black feathers slightly speckled. Their beaks had white markings at the corners. Soon after my first sighting of the young, I stopped seeing the adults near the house.

After waiting a few weeks to make sure the birds had flown, we brought down the house and discovered a beautiful nest inside made entirely of fine twigs. There were also plenty of droppings - surprisingly, the female had not been very house-proud.

We have placed the next box on the tree after removing the nest made of twigs. Now I am waiting for it to be occupied again.



**BIRDWATCHING IN JUNAGADH.** A.K. CHAKRAVARTHY, Entomologist, University of Agricultural Sciences, GKVK, Bangalore

Urban activities are widely dispersed in Gujarat and there is a system of smaller towns around the metropolis in a way that the 'Urban effect' on towns is less. Junagadh (21° 31'N, 70° 28'E) is one such town in Gujarat. Being placed in the town for a week during April 1993, I watched birds with a 8 x 30 binoculars.

Bird watching was restricted to vacant patches. The vacant patches were dotted with amlī *Pithecellobium dulce*, Garus amlī *Pithecellobium* sp., gunda *Ficus* spp., *Melia* spp., *Salmaia* spp. Ryan, Jambu *Syzygium* spp, and Boradi - the

common feature being that the fruiting parts of these plants were bright coloured and very attractive to birds, bats and rodents.

Forty four species of birds were sighted in a week. Forty per cent were insectivores, 30% frugivores + granivores, 20% carrion and animal prey feeders, 5% were nectarivore and another 5% were omnivores. On a *Ficus bengalensis* tree at 5.15 a.m. 39 koels, 14 coppersmiths, 8 small green barbets, 16 common mynas, 8 jungle crows and 21 Brahminy mynas were observed. These heterogeneous flocks of birds were noisy and displayed frequent displacements, flutter or trembling of wing feathers, wiping the bill, preening the feathers and pecking at other birds. There was much competition for the prime food resources of the tree. All through the day, bird calls could be heard. Coppersmiths, sunbirds, parakeets, doves, bulbuls and mynas seem to be using the vacant sites for roosting and nesting. Redstart, tree-pie, roller, green pigeons, peacocks etc. seemed to be drop-in-visitors.

In Junagadh, birds abound on roadside trees, backyards of houses, vacant places, around governmental and private buildings, campuses of the University, etc. This is because of native fruit-yielding plants mentioned above. It is these plants which hold key to the bird wealth of the town. Unfortunately, these plants now represent remnants of the town. Once upon a time vacant landscapes with these plants stretched for miles. There were wild herbs, shrubs and creepers blooming in their place and season.

No management is needed to sustain the vacant patch-habitat except that they need protection from encroachment by the public. Most plants inhabiting the vacant sites are drought tolerant and hardy. Controlled fire and pruning at times is all that is needed for reenergizing the habitat.



**RECORD OF BIRDS OF PREY IN NAMERI WILDLIFE SANCTUARY, ASSAM.** BIBHAB KUMAR TALUKDAR\* and RANJAN KUMAR DAS\*\*, \*Animal Ecology & Wildlife Biology Laboratory, Department of Zoology, Gauhati University, Guwahati 781 014, Assam, \*\*Divisional Forest Officer, Western Assam Wildlife Division, Dolabari, Tezpur 784 001, Assam

Nameri Wildlife Sanctuary is situated in the foothills of eastern Himalayas and within the civil district of Sonitpur, Assam. The sanctuary is interconnected with the Pakhui Wildlife Sanctuary of Arunachal Pradesh and is little explored from ecological point of view. The area consists of around 137.07 sq km and was declared as a wildlife sanctuary in the year 1985. Ornithological cum other faunal expedition in the sanctuary was initiated from May 1995 by the authors and since then the work is in progress. During the two years of study the authors found that the sanctuary is one of the

potential sites for the conservation of birds of prey which are now threatened.

The birds of prey recorded during the two years period in the sanctuary are shown in Table-1. One of the interesting records of birds of prey in the sanctuary is the king vulture *Sarcogyps calvus*, which is becoming threatened and its population is fast dwindling. Although the king vulture was earlier common in Assam, but in last ten years its record in Assam has become very rare. Another interesting record in the sanctuary is the white tailed sea eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*, which has been recorded during 1996-97 winter. The presence of 16 species of birds of prey in the sanctuary reverberates the unique habitat richness of the sanctuary.

**Table-1 : Showing the birds of Prey recorded in Nameri Sanctuary during 1995-97**

Sl. No.	Name of the Species	Status
1	Blyth's baza <i>Aviceda jerdoni</i>	Rare
2	Black crested baza <i>Aviceda leuphotes</i>	Rare
3	Oriental honey buzzard <i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>	Common
4	Black-winged kite <i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	Common
5	Rufous bellied hawk eagle <i>Hieraaetus kienerii</i>	Rare
6	Bonelli's hawk eagle <i>Hieraaetus fasciatus</i>	Rare
7	Pallas fishing eagle <i>Haliaeetus leucoryphus</i>	Common
8	White-tailed sea eagle <i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	Rare
9	White backed vulture <i>Gyps bengalensis</i>	Common
10	Indian longbilled vulture <i>Gyps indicus</i>	Common
11	Hen harrier <i>Circus cyaneus</i>	Rare
12	Crested serpent eagle <i>Spilornis cheela</i>	Rare
13	Osprey <i>Pandion haliastrur</i>	Common
14	King vulture <i>Sarcogyps calvus</i>	Rare
15	Brahminy kite <i>Haliastrur indus</i>	Rare
16	Longlegged buzzard <i>Buteo rulinus</i>	Rare

☆

## REVIEW

**THE HUMAN NATURE OF BIRDS**, by THEODORE XENOPHON BARBER, Ph. D. 218 Pages, \$ 10.85. Reviewed by IRMELA FUTEHALLY, 403, Nippon Apts., Mumbai 400 049

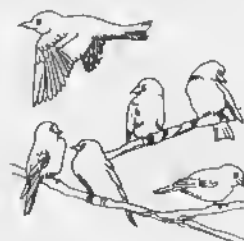
A title that would surely catch the eye and imagination "knowing" that there isn't such a thing. Yet many who have kept birds in captivity possibly agree they have glimpsed another side, or a glimpse of human nature in their pets. There are many more animals like the gorilla, whales, fish and bees discussed in this book - a slight deception of the title.

The author, "a hard-headed sceptical researcher" as he calls himself, began a six year study to challenge the common world view that the behaviour of birds is guided by instinct only. Eight chapters of the book deal with avian intelligence, language, music, play and personal friendships between other birds and humans. It is believed that birds navigate intelligently which means that they are capable of making decisions if changes in their routes are required. For example if a landmark is hidden by fog or clouds, or the sun or stars not visible their flight path is altered accordingly.

Some observations seem to suggest that song-birds do sing for fun, give performance to their own kind and compose actively, using techniques similar to human composers. Apparently our 'own sensory limitations prevent us from perceiving the virtues of bird song. An example is given on page 95 by the musicologist Len Howard who observed the day to day life of dozens of wild birds living in her orchard. She writes of the European blackbirds : "Each bird appears to try for variety of effect by singing his tunes at different paces, adding embellishments, altering the key, singing in major or minor modes using staccato or legato. The blackbird even tries turning his phrase upside down . He has a wide range of intervals in his song. His delivery is calm and controlled vibrato and used effectively and with great discrimination" (page 51-52)

The phenomenon of group singing is also described by Howard. "About thirty linnets arrive at a particular tree in an excited purposeful manner, and alighting simultaneously and near together. Then one bird starts singing. By about his third note another joins in the rest following in quick succession, perhaps six at a time entering the chorus, some trilling, some twittering, some singing upward and downward slurred notes until all voices continue in a great crescendo for a few moments. Then the volume gradually sinks while over the fields another flock is seen in rushing flight for the linnets' tree. They settle beside the singers and now the chorus swells again, the two flocks by degrees uniting in song until every bird has joined in an undoubted crescendo. The sound of the chorus travels far, stirring other flocks feeding in more distant places. Before long there is another hurried rushing of wings, and the tree, bare of leaf, becomes laden with linnets on every twig, all voicing their loudest fortissimo . The song reaches its climax which is held for a time. Then the tone falls and rises again, until suddenly, all together the birds take to flight, their minds tuned to one accord in song, now act under one impulse to fly."

The author invites us to share his belief that some of the characteristics of birds and animals and humans have a fundamental similarity about them. But in spite of the many examples he has given, the message does not come home. The human mind is in a category of its own.



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## DNA sets trap for bird thieves

MARTIN WAIN WRIGHT

The highly organised and determined criminal trade in the eggs and chicks of British birds of prey is to be countered by the world's first DNA database for birds.

Police have collected feather samples from remote but regularly raided nesting sites in the northern Pennines to use in prosecutions over goshawks, merlins and other birds valued by falconers in Britain and abroad.

Genetics research at Nottingham university has pioneered the system, which replaces expensive and often difficult blood-sampling of wild raptors. As in human DNA-testing, every bird has a distinct pattern, and stolen wild birds will be traceable back to pillaged nests.

"You would be astonished at the number of people who keep falcons", said Steve Downing, wildlife officer for West Yorkshire police, which is testing the system on its own patch and at nests covered by Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Derbyshire police forces. "Nest robbers know exactly what they are doing, and breeds such as peregrines, hen harriers and merlins are under increasing threat".

Every merlin chick in West Yorkshire's main breeding grounds, Keighley and Calderdale, was stolen last year, together with all but one of the country's young peregrines and all but four of hen harrier chicks at the 12 known nesting sites.

"Thieves will now know that we have a sample from just about every nest," said Mr Downing, who receives regular tip-offs about suspect birds from legitimate falconers. Fanciers will pay £700 or more for a young hawk, with a "genuine wild" pedigree often putting up the black market value.

The genetic research has been funded by £20,000 from government agencies and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. The effective protection of nests could see the numbers of birds of prey revive dramatically. Merlins and peregrine falcons number about 1,250 breeding pairs in Britain, hen harriers 650 and goshawks 450.

The Scheme will be tested during this year's breeding season and extended to the rest of Britain if it proves effective.

*Guardian Weekly, April 1997.*

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Cover : Small Blue Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) is an unmistakable bird with brilliant colours, possessing a long pointed beak, large head and stumpy tail. typically seen perched on a branch or a vantage point above water, it swiftly plunges head-long into water with a splash and emerges at once with a small tish. When alarmed it bobs and jerks its head cackling subdued *click click* calls. Frequently darts just above the water at full speed from one end of the tank to the other calling sharp *chickee chickee*.

*Photo : S. Sridhar, ARPS*